ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE 13 Section I CHICAGO TRIBUNE 23 May 1986

Perspective

Goodbye to a charismatic contra

By Rogers Worthington

Declaring that victory was unobtainable, Nicaraguan contra leader Eden Pastora lay down his AR15 last week, walked across the San Juan River and sought sanctuary in Costa Rica.

Not since Roberto Duran walked away from a confounding Sugar Ray Leonard has so intractable a Latin fighter quit his arena of choice. What ultimately confounded Pastora, however, was not the enemy, but the politics of being a contra.

News of his quitting the 4-year-old guerrilla war was certain to cause smiles in Managua. Seven years ago as Commander Zero, he helped bring the Sandinistas to power. No defection hurt the FSLN more symbolically than Pastora's.

Smiles also were likely in the contra command posts of Honduras and Miami, where Pastora was viewed more as a competitor and antagonist than a colleague. There even may have been smiles among some U.S. strategists who have long struggled like Sisyphus to create a unified contra front.

But Reagan administration officials who pinned their hopes on the unlikely long shot of a contra victory ought to lament Pastora's decision. For along with him goes one of the strongest strands of credibility in the contra flag's fabric of ragged purposes.

Impulsive, self-centered, hard to work with and marginally effective as a contra military commander, Pastora nonetheless had charisma and a vision of social revolution that paid no obeisance to Marxism or superpower.

Despite his many failings and his growing isolation in the last year, Pastora was the contras' only democratic revolutionary with an international reputation. It was to him and the Southern Opposition Bloc based in Costa Rica—and not the Honduras-based FDN—that many disillusioned former Sandinista officials gravitated in recent years. And it was from him that many of those same people later pulled away, frustrated by his refusal to cooperate for what they saw as the greater good.

Unlike U.S. policymakers, Pastora recognized early what was to him this simple truth: A rebel group with any chance of ousting the Sandinistas must be as vigorously anti-Somocista and anti-imperialist as it was anticommunist and anti-Marxist.

Eden Pastora should have been the logical choice to lead a united contra force. Instead, U.S. policymakers sought to make of him a legitimizing addendum to the FDN [Nicaraguan Democratic Force], a more controllable, already established group dominated at key levels by former Somoza National Guardsmen and Nicaraguan businessmen.

Pastora rejected repeated CIA attempts to get him to join with the FDN, arguing that it made no political sense to ally with former members of a force widely despised in Nicaragua. Some say the real reason for his reluctance was his not being offered the top leadership position in any such union between the FDN and his own ARDE [Democratic Revolutionary Alliance].

For FDN leaders, Pastora was a nettlesome showboat, a nonteam player who refused to compromise the role he had cast for himself as true defender of the Nicaraguan revolution and Augusto Sandino's spirit.

Some distrusted him because he had been a member of the Sandinista government, both as deputy minister of the interior and deputy defense minister. Some have even considered him a divisive fifth columnist and double agent for the Sandinistas.

Pastora and the FDN, it turned out, were mutually unacceptable to each other, and he opted to lead a southern front band of his own out of Costa Rica rather than be part of a Somocista- and CIA-tainted army in Honduras. [Not that he was reluctant to accept CIA help. It has been reported that he did so until all aid was cut off in 1984, but because he valued his independent image, this was something he fiercely denied.]

Since the Reagan administration made its backing of the contras overt, however, Pastora had been less circumspect about where his money came from. He even traveled to Washington in February and March and urged Congress to pass the administration's proposed $100 million contra-aid package.

For Pastora, that was as close to becoming a team player in the contra league as he was likely to get. The visit should have been a propitious time for him. Secretary of State George Shultz, with whom he met, announced he wanted to include him in the new aid package. But shortly after his return to Central America, Pastora's reluctance to join a new umbrella contra group, the United Nicaraguan Opposition [UNO], heralded his retirement a week ago.

The new, U.S.-supported coalition is led by two former Pastora allies, Arturo Cruz and Alfonso Robelo, with FDN leader Adolfo Calero. When Pastora would not join, approaches were made to his top commanders. By last week, all but one had left him, preferring what they hope will be a sure supply of funds and ammunition with UNO than a fading future with Pastora and ARDE.

Yet Pastora may have divined correctly that there is no sure future for any of the contras, save oblivion. If Nicaragua signs the Contadora agreement June 6, the congressional debate over aid would become moot.

However events unfold, Eden Pastora will be remembered for blending the classic Latin *caudillo* role with Che Guevara romanticism and daring. But the blend never served him well in a conflict requiring the kind of sanitized, selfless leadership taught by American military schools. Pastora had not really learned the lesson learned so well by his former Sandinista colleagues during their days in the hills: Insurgency is primarily a political, not a military, venture.

But some still find news of his retirement hard to believe. "I find it hard to accept that a person with such a strong commitment to a democratic cause would just give up," said a State Department spokesman. "That's just not Latin."

Rogers Worthington is a Tribune metropolitan reporter who was on assignment in Central America when he was West Coast correspondent.